Chapter 1

Introduction to the study of Buddhism

Essential reading

Gethin, R. *The foundations of Buddhism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) [ISBN 9780192892231] pp.1–6.

Harvey, P. *An introduction to Buddhism: teachings, history and practices*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) [ISBN 9780521313339] pp.1-8.

Williams, P. *Mahayana Buddhism: the doctrinal foundations*. (London: Taylor & Francis Books Ltd, second edition 2009) [ISBN 9780415356527].

Further reading

Conze, E. (editor and translator) *Buddhist scriptures*. (London: Penguin Books, 1959) [ISBN 0140440887] pp.1–4.

Cush, D. *Buddhism*. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, Educational Division, 1993) [ISBN 0340546913] pp.11–16.

Robinson, R.H. and W.L. Johnson *The Buddhist religion. a historical introduction*. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997) [ISBN 0534207189] pp.1–6.

Introduction

The main purpose of this chapter is to give you an outline of Buddhism and a few of its key features, so that you will have a 'framework' in which to place your studies of individual topic areas.

What is Buddhism?

'Buddhism' is a Western term which was devised during the eighteenth century's European Enlightenment to describe the teachings and practices of the Buddha, the 'Awakened One' or 'Enlightened One', who lived in India about 2,500 years ago (Robinson, 1996, p.1). The term has only recently been accepted by Asian Buddhists, who previously referred to their religion as 'the *Dharma'* – 'teaching' – Sanskrit, 'the Buddha's message' or 'the Buddha's way' (Robinson and Johnson, 1997, p.1). 'The Buddha' usually refers to Siddhattha Gotama, the historical Buddha, but Buddhists think that there may be other Buddhas who have lived on earth in the distant past or who may do so in the future. Later forms of Buddhism also include belief in Buddhas who exist in other parts of the universe. All these Buddhas are known as *samma-sambuddha*'s – 'perfect fully Awakened Ones', but there may also be 'buddhas' in a lesser sense who have awakened to the truth by practising the teaching of a perfect Buddha (Harvey, 1990, p.1).

There are about 500 million Buddhists today (Cush, 1993, p.1). Most are to be found in Asia, although in recent years there has been a growing interest in Buddhism in America, Europe and Australasia.[1]

[1]Further details may be found in Harvey (1990) pp.5–8. A map of Buddhism in the ancient world may be found in Gethin (1998) p.xv, and there are maps of Buddhism in the modern world in Gethin (1998) p.xvi, Harvey (1990) pp.6–7 and Robinson (1996) pp.xvi–xvii.

Buddhist schools of thought

Two main Buddhist schools of thought survive – the Theravada (pronounced 'Teravada') and the Mahayana.

The Theravada

According to the Theravada – 'doctrine of the elders', enlightenment is attained through the individual's own efforts, with the help of the *Dhamma* – 'teaching' – Pali. This form of Buddhism is followed by the southern countries of Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, and is therefore sometimes called Southern Buddhism. It is also referred to as Pali Buddhism, after the language of its scriptures.

The Mahayana

The Mahayana probably began as a minority monastic movement which developed from earlier forms of Buddhism. Mahayana means 'Great Vehicle' and was contrasted by Mahayana Buddhists with other forms of Buddhism (of which only the Theravada remains today), which became known as the Hinayana – a derogatory term meaning 'Lesser Vehicle'. Mahayana Buddhism produced many new scriptures and taught devotion to holy saviour beings. It also produced its own philosophies and schools. Mahayana Buddhism, which is practised in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam, is sometimes known as Eastern Buddhism.

Vajrayana

There is also a third vehicle, the Vajrayana – 'Vehicle of the Diamond or Thunderbolt' (Gethin, 1998, p.2, Robinson, 1996, p.4), also known as Tantric Buddhism. It is also called Tibetan or Northern Buddhism and is practised in Tibet and Mongolia, parts of Nepal and Himalayan India.

Note that Cush includes Tibetan/Northern Buddhism in the Mahayana school. This is because 'its outlook is broadly that of the Mahayana, but its more specific orientation is that of the 'Vehicle of the Diamond Thunderbolt'' (Gethin, 1998, p.2).

Western Buddhists either choose one of the existing varieties of Buddhism, or choose from these what they find helpful and form their own variety – as the Western Buddhist Order has done, for example.

Note that introductory textbooks have varying approaches to the presentation of the different forms of Buddhism. Broadly speaking, these approaches may be divided into two types:[2]

[2] *Robinson (1996) p.3.*

- the diachronic, which tries to deal with events in chronological order
- the synchronic, which focuses on particular themes.

Robinson (1996) takes the former approach, whereas Gethin (1998) pp.2–3 takes the latter. In order to cover the syllabus for this paper, this subject guide uses a combination of these two methods.

Reading

> Read pp.1–6 of Gethin (1998), pp.1–3 and 4–8 of Harvey (1990) and pp.1-44 of Williams (2009).

Activity

> Why does Williams reject the theory that the Mahayana was developed by lay people?

Buddhist texts

The Buddhist scriptures cover 'tens and hundreds of thousands of pages' (Conze, 1959, p.11). The Pali Canon fills 45 large volumes in the Siamese edition, a Japanese edition of the Chinese scriptures consists of 100 volumes, each with 1,000 pages, and the Tibetan scriptures in the same edition take up 325 volumes (Conze, 1959, p.11).

Most of the Pali Canon has been translated into English, but only some texts from the Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist scriptures have been translated. This means that, unless we have knowledge of the relevant languages, we can only have access to parts of the Buddhist scriptures.

An overview of the Buddhist scriptures can be found in Harvey (1990, pp.322–24) and Robinson (1996, pp.311–14).

Reading

Read pp.3–4 of Harvey (1990).

The languages of Buddhism

I have already said that Pali is the language of Southern Buddhism. Sanskrit is the language of Mahayana Buddhism in India, and Eastern and Northern Buddhism generally use Tibetan or Chinese translations of the Mahayana texts.

Harvey (1990) notes that many books about Buddhism give only the Sanskrit versions of words. However, Sanskrit is no longer used by Buddhists (except in Nepal), whereas Pali is still widely used. In this subject guide I will follow Harvey's practice of using Pali when writing about early Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism and Buddhism in general, and Sanskrit when writing about Mahayana Buddhism, the early schools which came to use Sanskrit and Hinduism. Like Harvey, I will use the Sanskrit word *karma* instead of the Pali word *kamma* since this is now also an English word.[3]

Non-English words are indicated by the use of italics. Again following Harvey, '…'s' will be used to show that the English plural ending is not part of the original word. But whereas Harvey uses this device only at the first occurrence of each word, I will do so at every occurrence of a non-English word with an English plural ending.

Useful glossaries (lists of definitions) may be found in Cush (1993) pp.165–68, Gethin (1998) pp.319–22, and Robinson (1996) pp.319–25. But do remember that there are many cases in which a translation is unable to capture the full meaning of a term – for example, *Dhamma* has up to 10 meanings (Conze, 1959, p.14).

[3] Pronunciation guides may be found in Harvey (1990) pp.xx–xxii, and Robinson (1996) pp.315–18.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have outlined some of the key aspects of Buddhism. You are now ready to study the life and teachings of the Buddha.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter and the recommended reading, you should be able to:

- define 'Buddhism'
- distinguish between three schools of thought
- outline some of the difficulties associated with the use of Buddhist scriptures as a resource for the study of Buddhism
- identify the main languages of the Buddhist scriptures.

Sample examination question

1. Since the aim of this chapter was simply to introduce you to the study of Buddhism, there are no sample questions relating exclusively to the material covered by this chapter.